

# FRANK GILLETTE and IRA SCHNEIDER



## PARTS I and II of an interview

by JUD YALKUT

**Part I:** (reprinted from *The East Village Other*, July 30, 1969, vol. 4, no. 35)

*Ira Schneider is, or was, a filmmaker who previously had studied art history and research psychology, and had begun making films in 1963. In the winter of 1968-9, he joined forces with Frank Gillette, a former painter, who, since 1965 had experimented with communications and videotape programming. As a case study of why a number of filmmakers and other artists have migrated into the realm of television and videotape, the following rap with Ira and Frank, part one a developmental conversation to be continued, may prove extremely useful in understanding this shift in perspective, as well as why a film column like this should range the entire broadening spectrum of media and intermedia.*

**FRANK:** . . . Film people come to videotape as an extension of film; it's a relief for them. They see videotape in a large part as a means of making film easy, whereas tape is an entirely different realm, having many more bogus similarities to film than genuine ones.

**IRA:** Of course you're saying that as a painter.

(Laughter)

**JUD:** How do painters and filmmakers get into videotape—how did you both get into it?

**FRANK:** I got into it when Fordham University—Marshall McLuhan's Media Center—whatever it was called—laid some equipment on me a year ago last June. Basically the unit was two studio cameras, two portable cameras, two playback decks, and two monitors, and about \$300 worth of tape—that, plus some minimal editing equipment, various microphones, cords and addendum things. I had this equipment for three months in which to do whatever I wanted. It was like using the artist-in-residence concept in reverse—in other words, you take the residence out to the artist and give it to him to work with. So I had four TV units for three months and I produced a few programs with it. That was my introduction to tape.

**IRA:** I got into videotape when I found that the type of filming I wanted to do required particular ease and little stress on production—whereas in filming, it was always difficult to get sync sound without the use of a crew. What I wanted to do was environmental and very loose, and I found it much easier to work with videotape equipment than with film equipment because basically you got everything down, AND with sync sound, and you could do whatever you wanted to it afterwards. I've always had difficulty working with low budgets, using film equipment and having to depend upon people to help me. Videotape cuts down the size of the crew and provides sync sound from the word "go." Another advantage to videotape is that it fosters a life quality which I didn't always get on film. Somehow the media are different.

**JUD:** The immediacy of the television medium.

**FRANK:** Well, half-inch videotape was a technological compromise in a way. It compromised image definition for portability. You can make a portable videotape reasonably if you put the information on half-inch tape. It's the other side of the equation being equalled out. In terms of the television definition of resolution, 230 lines is a high-resolution picture. It's only a low resolution picture when it's compared with, say, 560 lines.

**IRA:** When we talk of 560 lines, which is standard broadcast television, we're talking about 560 at the point of transmission. By the time it's received by a set it's down to 320 lines. So there's not too much actual difference between that, say, 220 line capability of a portable system.



**FRANK:** The potential of cable television (CATV) is that with adaption you can send any signal over the line—the cable line—without having to go to the two-inch quadriplex tape which is not portable. You can essentially produce a cable TV station with facilities built around portable equipment. You eliminate the interface problem by transmitting through cable as opposed to throwing it out into the air. The FCC requires 560 lines when throwing signals into the air because of the chances of break-up, interference, and all kinds of electronic pollution.

**IRA:** It's a difference in rationale because with cable you're getting no loss. When you're passing a signal from a video amplifier through cable you're getting basically what your output is at the reception site.

**FRANK:** The only existing problem with cable is that they have to be insulated because signals can transfer and pollute each other.

**JUD:** Like crosstalk on magnetic tape.

**FRANK:** Exactly. So with some minor adaptations, the essential attribute of videotape when it connects with CATV is that it uses already existing systems. Now, television is usually understood in terms of a receiver. Our idea is to render that void. Television is something you feedback with as much as you receive with—which is a symbiosis—which works both ways. That's the vast potential of cable TV hooking up with portable equipment. You can have everybody running around with portable TVs like people running around now with Bolex cameras, and by eliminating the interface with that and transmitting, using cable.

**IRA:** Perhaps we should quickly run through these different television notions: CATV, CCTV (Closed Circuit TV), and UHF. The notion is that closed circuit TV is akin to cable TV in that closed circuit, if we're talking about videotape or storage of information and playback, plays back from the recorder into a wire that runs into the monitor. CATV is an extension of this in that the wire-cable—between the playback and the monitor is much longer. The longer the cable, the more you have to generate the signal so that it can travel that far—it needs amplification.

**FRANK:** Closed circuit TV is best understood in terms of a stereo system. A few years ago there were no stereo systems, and no software to play on stereo systems. Likewise, in 5 or 10 years, closed circuit systems will probably be as popular as stereo systems are now, and as you have stereo albums for stereo systems, you'll have videotape albums for video systems.

**IRA:** Although EVR (Electronic Video Recording) that CBS is coming out with may interfere with that I think EVR is another hype.

**FRANK:** It's a reactionary technological move.

**IRA:** EVR is not videotape but a combination of magnetic sound strip and film to be played back through a special apparatus on your TV receiver or monitor. I think their main interest in investing in this system is that it is basically like Super 8 film, and they expect to be putting out entertainment albums on EVR, and unlike videotape, it will be difficult to copy so that they can control the market.

**FRANK:** It's going against the current of the nature of television. Television has ubiquitous access. If you let the system run wild, everyone can get in on it, and it's not held by selected hands.

**JUD:** You were going to mention UHF (Ultra-High Frequency).

**IRA:** UHF is simply a means of putting more channels out for broadcast—thrown through the air. However, it suffers the same limitations as standard broadcast in the sense that it's regulated immediately by the FCC—though not as rigorously and commercially compelling as standard broadcast—but still frozen to a certain number of channels.

**FRANK:** On the other hand, UHF will probably serve as the first show for the WBAI-Pacific radio kind of experiment when it reaches television—it'll probably not be CATV. UHF is now serving some function in the sense of sub-cultural TV serving the minority communities.

**IRA:** But UHF now has severe limitations because it is mostly set-up by people who are committed to the standard format of broadcast TV—limited like standard broadcast in the sense of what they can deliver or what they can see is necessary in terms of information transmission to people. For the most part now I see TV as a dehumanized media.

**FRANK:** At the present time. But that's not intrinsic to the system that television is. We're interested in exhausting the potential of what television is as a total system.



**JUD:** Frank, what was your first work in television?

**FRANK:** Well, I had been doing monochromist minimal painting, dealing with concrete concepts, and I had reached a hiatus in painting. Along came the contact with Fordham, and I first produced a five and a half hour documentary on St. Mark's Place. I spent three weeks standing on Gem's Spa corner interviewing the locals. The documentary's conception was that it focused from the inside out—these people defining themselves, and not my going in and extracting information of which they're only an element. They basically gave their raps on videotape.

**IRA:** And during this period Frank existed on egg creams and marshmallow candies.

**FRANK:** That lasted three weeks. Then I experimented through the Village Project with the effects of videotape on kids with bad trips—15 to 19 year olds—burnt-out acid cases—let them use the cameras on me, themselves, as a means of expression as opposed to a means of recording their expression. They were alienated from their shrinks who came in periodically to extract information from them on the St. Marks' scene. Videotape was a new, favorable means of feedback for them, they dug it.

I also used videotape like a canvas, specifically about four hours of what I call a self-portrait on videotape, that used four cameras with two feedback systems. There are points in the self-portrait where you see on tape me looking at myself on tape, looking at myself on tape. There were generations of feedback, and the gradual alienation from one's previously considered image into an entirely redefined image of oneself.

At a point in December, I met Ira, we discussed working together, and we went out to Antioch College in January and February.

**IRA:** We were invited out by David Brooks, who was teaching in the film department and who managed to get us access to their TV studio equipment. We brought our own Sony portable equipment, and completed about 20 hours of taping there, combining many approaches, in the studio and in the streets. The basic notion was that we were going out to meet an American sub-culture without any preconceptions and to work through interaction.

**JUD:** You had been filming and not working in television prior to this?

**IRA:** No. I stopped that summer when a film project fell through because of lack of funds. I was filming this British painter painting the **SALVATION** building in Sheridan Square and his interaction with the indigenous people, from him alone painting, to over fifty people dancing in the streets and decorating the phonebooths. I won't mention the cameraman's name, but he was an inveterate zoomer, which made cutting the shots very difficult. Again with film you have to spread out production among many people, and if you don't have an organized group, it becomes impossible.

(Ira Schneider's previous films include **The Frantic Pedantic Semantic Antic**, **The Ghost of Wittgenstein**, and **Lost in Cuddihy**—a prize winner of the 1966 National Student Assoc. Film Contest.)

**JUD:** What happened after that?

**IRA:** Well, let's see—four months of depression (laughter), thinking about what I was going to do next, and then I woke up one morning saying, "Television, television, that's how to communicate quickly." And then I met Frank. I decided videotape would be the next move, grabbed a knapsack full of money, some videotape equipment, a car, forty pounds of salt pork, cans of baked beans, and we split for Antioch—where we did some lecturing and involved the students as actors in our studio and non-studio work. One technique was to introduce four to six people into a studio with only chairs facing cameras, leaving them there and working the cameras from outside.

**FRANK:** We gave them minimal instructions, like—you can't communicate with each other unless you communicate through the camera. Under each camera was a mirror—they sat in the chairs, could do anything they wanted, but only through the media—the camera, and they could use the mirror to facilitate their actions.

**IRA:** Sometimes the rules were more and sometimes less restrictive—like the restriction being only not to destroy the cameras. We also taped out at David Brooks' country house with actors—loose plots—an actor peeling potatoes, and suddenly he was a farmer who had lived there forty years.

**FRANK:** We also picked up the town, a strike at a bookbindery, interviews with farmers, children, and the locals at the doughnut bakery there in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

**IRA:** And then we had the Cincinnati jugband in the basement.

**FRANK:** And a vain attempt at a skin flick on tape.

**IRA:** We canned that, but we got a lot of beautiful bathtub footage.

**JUD:** Some of the bathtub scenes were included in your **WIPE CYCLE** television mural at the Howard Wise Gallery TV AS A CREATIVE MEDIUM show.





**FRANK:** The original proposal was to distribute the tape delay systems throughout the gallery, but because that would have interfered with other exhibits it was shelved, and the mural conception with the delay mechanisms on one wall was introduced.

**IRA:** I guess we just designed for the space provided for us—an entrance piece, or opening piece, facing the Gallery elevator and picking up people as they came in.

**FRANK:** To emphasize this point we taped our co-exhibitors while the show was being set-up and programmed these bits into WIPE CYCLE to give it an interesting internal feedback quality. You saw the show being put together as you entered the gallery, and the rest of the show was how it had been put together.

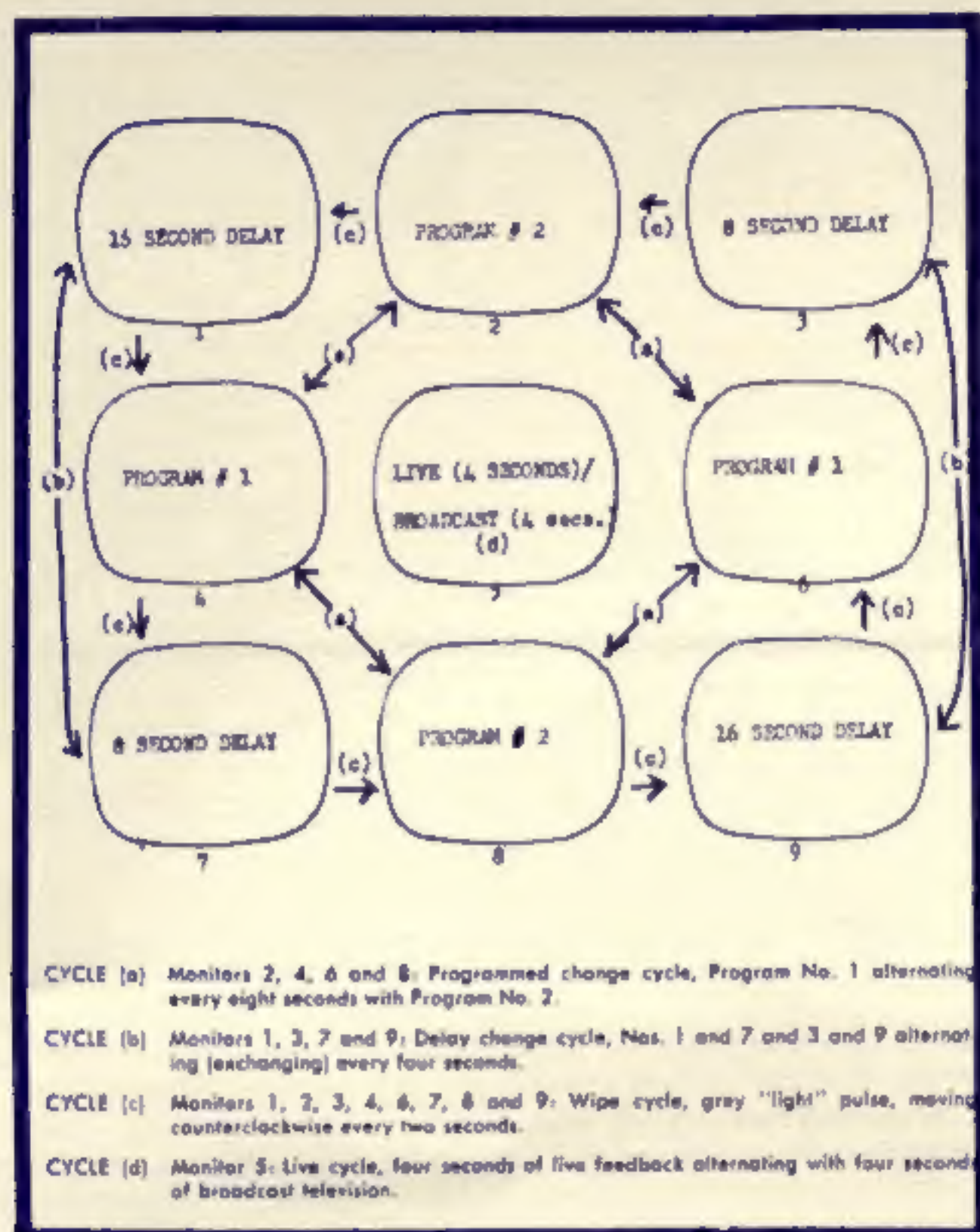
**IRA:** The most important facet of WIPE CYCLE was the notion of information presentation, and the integration of the audience into the information.



**FRANK:** It was an attempt to demonstrate that you're as much a piece of information as tomorrow morning's headlines—as a viewer you take a satellite relationship to the information. And the satellite which is you is incorporated into the thing which is being sent back to the satellite—in other words, rearranging one's experience of information reception.

**IRA:** WIPE CYCLE's physical makeup is a television mural consisting of nine monitors.

**FRANK:** It's a prototype model—



**IRA:** A live feedback system that enables a viewer standing in his environment to see himself not only NOW in time and space, but also 8 seconds ago and 16 seconds ago, and these are in juxtaposition and in flux. In addition he sees standard broadcast images which come on at periods alternating with his live image, and also two programmed shows which are collage-like, ranging from a shot of the earth from outer space, to cows grazing to 57th St. Somehow there's a juxtaposition between the now of the person, the individual, with other elements of information about the Universe and America, and so the general reaction seems to have been a somewhat objectifying experience, and also a somewhat integrating experience in terms of one's place in the Universe.

**FRANK:** It's an attempt to reshuffle one's temporal experience—one's sense of time and space.

**IRA:** Yes, we seem to have a facility to abstract small sections of material—

**FRANK:** Which is an important point. Videotape lends itself to collage more easily than film because of the accessibility of the image.

**IRA:** One thing we succeeded in doing at Antioch was turning the kids onto using videotape in their own work, and then we split back to New York, and shortly thereafter fell into **WIPE CYCLE**.

**FRANK:** Back in New York, I got a call from Howard Wise who had been given a list of people working in videotape by Nam June Paik, and our names were on it. We brought Wise a proposal essentially like **WIPE CYCLE** which was later adapted into its final form.





**Part II: (EVO, August 6, 1969, vol. 4, no. 36)**

**JUD:** What possibilities do you see for the integration of abstract television effects and electronic distorting devices, such as Nam June Paik uses, in your TV work?

**FRANK:** I'm not as much interested in my work in pure abstraction as with the potential of TV for collage abstraction, that is to say, the taking of real elements which read as real—or live on videotape—and juxtaposing them in abstract formulas to create a "living" abstraction. People see videotape and what they read in their skulls is "real"—it seems live, and has an unstored quality—like the live immediacy of even Walter Cronkite on the 7 o'clock news. I see television as a potential for using that "live" effect via abstraction, as a vehicle for an abstract statement from another angle, but I see it as no less than that.

**IRA:** I would add that the notion of abstraction also includes the notion of the abstraction of information, and the juxtaposition of information, which can be further spaced out by the integration of distortion circuitry effects. But basically, I think we look for a point from which to take off, for abstraction at a level of content, or of information, and then into something like notions of successive auras, which, by the way, come up on videotape once in a while. I won't say it's an aura, but there's electromagnetic interference of different kinds that enters into videotaping. Somehow it's picking up vibes.

**FRANK:** A videotape freak argued that the image on his viewfinder in a portable camera had been bettered by him feeding the camera good vibes.



**IRA:** In fact, we looked through it and it seemed that he was right. It was better.

**FRANK:** It was certainly the best viewfinder image I've ever seen in a videotape camera, and his claim was that he broke the camera in by sending it good vibes, by loving it, by psyching out the media and changing the image. An ideology can be built for better electronics through metaphysics.



To demonstrate the poignancy of tape, people have seen themselves fed back on film and fed back on tape, and invariably they say that tape is a much more eerie experience, particularly the initial witnessing: the first time you see yourself back on tape, it's the first genuine view from the outside of what the inside is like. A mirror is like an extension of the inside because you have to keep your eyes focused on it, and you're always looking at your eyes focused into a mirror. But with tape, you see yourself in every gesture, your kinetics are revealed; it's all suddenly outside; and it's the first time you've ever met that outside. Videotape sends a quality of the whole, and it's that poignant sense of the real whole that gives it strength. It sends a volume and tactility—a sense of touch, the texture of the volume.

**IRA:** In film I always get the feeling that my image is in a two-dimensional space; somehow I don't relate it to myself immediately. Whereas, in videotape, I tend to see my movements and my behaviors, the way I carry myself, much more vividly. I haven't felt any satisfactory definition of the differences in systems; I think it will continue to evolve.

**FRANK:** Film imitated theater, videotape imitates film; it's just beginning to develop. It's like the first automobile with the engine in the front, because that's where the horse was.

**IRA:** Or like the television media's news presentation coming off of a concept of "sound" news—as per radio.

**FRANK:** Or attempting to distribute TV's as they once distributed radios. Well, that's ignoring the potential of the system. The mentality that went into the distribution of the TV system is remarkably low—it was surrendered over to marketing. Television from its inception, with the slightest adaptations, had the potential of doing what it's doing now in terms of its flexibility and availability of access. Some CATV (Cable) stations are delivering nothing but commercials—they're total marketing experiments. How to market your product more efficiently; show them pictures of it with singsong, and send a program along with that to which they get narcotically addicted and sell soap; it's a potpourri of ailments being solved. That's what TV is about now.

**JUD:** Korzybski talked about plants being chemically binding, animals adding space-binding, and man time-binding; the fact that we can look at and interpret artifacts by an Egyptian.

**FRANK:** Yes, we are complex modes of all sorts of messages and signals, and one of these defines endurance. What videotape does is to dip into that; you can demonstrate an individual's sense of his own past with tape much clearer than anything I can think of, unless you add the even further dimensionality of holography where you can further articulate the three-dimensionality of the image. You can qualify it by getting a better space understanding of it but you can't anymore qualify it in terms of your temporal understanding of the tape. The delay system that we had in **WIPE CYCLE** is only an embryonic form of this. You can establish an entire environment where you're constantly tracking yourself every two seconds—at two second intervals every point going back ad infinitum is somewhere being fed back to you.

**IRA:** A delayed strobe.

**FRANK:** Only it's an informational strobe, not merely a light strobe. Which is one of the ideas that freaks me out and which I'd like to do. In other words, how many generations of self-feedback can you keep track of without totally losing the sense of yourself; literally, through electronic techniques, setting yourself up outside of your body. You don't have to sell the Hindu trip anymore, you sell the television set.

I foresee in the future that it'll be largely a matter of how much information you hold—information replaces capital in the economy. That cultural switchoff is not that far away. The revolution in America is not going to result from the clash of political ideologies; it's going to result from the saturation of information and the modes of information dissemination being entirely different, and at that point you'll have the American Revolution; and the only violence will be done to its own history, or its own sense of history.

**IRA:** Media violence, that's all.

**FRANK:** Paik is the George Washington of the movement, which has yet to encounter its Warren G. Harding.

The name of the game in this number—the entire videotape media number—is being in the position of out-thinking yourself, constantly expanding parameters, dropping previous boundaries, instituting new boundaries; it's constant reorientation because the volume of the information is so incredibly high, and the exhaustion and obsolescence with which the media information is used is a very high rate. So you're constantly faced with the situation that if you're holding an idea for longer than "x" period amount of time, two weeks perhaps, the idea is incorporated into the space and is obsolete. So the ideas have to be constantly generated in terms of always out-thinking the ideas that were previously generated—it's a spiralling process, leading to who knows where, and it's a direct result of the electronic process. It's like electronic foreplay—you can record and know what the cat on the other side of the world is thinking about as fast as you can know what you're thinking about; practically speaking it's about the same speed. And that changes the nature of the way information interacts and the way people take advantage of information.



**IRA:** Frank, I think, is in charge of generating vocabulary.

**JUD:** What's your feeling about the televising of the moon landing?

**FRANK:** The idea that everyone who has a television receiver will be capable of seeing the first step on the moon is a gigantic, universal confirmation of experience. Columbus didn't have that luxury. The entire world is with him literally, he's having his experience confirmed like nobody else has had their experience confirmed before—he's going to be stoned, just by mere vibration feedback his experience will be confirmed. Like the first motherfucker who hit the North Pole, or Mount Everest, he says oh shit, this is his that that he's doing, he's all alone by himself, he's got to come back and rap about it.

**IRA:** These guys don't have to hold it in. They can rap while it's happening. But I wish it didn't sound like a football game.

**FRANK:** One of the environmental TV projects we're in the process of designing for "X" is a complete system in which the room would be the experienced core of the television environment, with one wall which would entail color. A third of the system would be direct color tape, and two thirds of the system would be black and white adapted to color through the use of filters and so on, and the elements would be around 18 monitors and a videotape projection system, using retrieval, delay units, projection mechanisms for matting one image over another image (where you get 3 or 4 overlays).

**IRA:** Let's say, integration of the live audience onto pretaped material.

**FRANK:** It would probably use six cameras, some rotating, some stationary, and all serving the different functions of throwing the witness to the experience into the feedback of the experience.

**IRA:** We'll be dealing with media ecology.

**FRANK:** One of the ideas for which we haven't found backing yet, would be a video chamber with a plexiglass core, so one would actually enter the chamber physically—and 360 degrees around, the chamber structure would be a system of monitors feeding back your own image integrated with programmed material.

**IRA:** From many different angles.

**FRANK:** For example, if you were standing in this chamber, the camera may be shooting from underneath and feeding back the image of shooting you from underneath overhead, and this would be switching with other positions. And the manifestation of this would be that you would enter the chamber and experience the total TV environment, where you would have contact with a contiguous environment, and that would be the maximum TV experience given the current state of the technology. Besides using separate monitors we're looking into the possibility of having a circular or chamber shaped video-receptive screen for projection.

**IRA:** Which is not yet available commercially, but will be in the next few years. I think content is, by and large, the most important thing, and particularly its applications in helping people to better realize the objectifying experience. In other words, seeing themselves from outside themselves, which potentially can lead to the realization that we are all actors—or that we are not realizing our potential. That much of our energy is relegated to our habit patterns, and the behavior that's carried us through to this point. When you can see yourself on TV, and the back of yourself simultaneously—something that we seldom if ever get a chance to do—if we extend this further into the notion of an environment, one can see oneself in a social, or spatial interaction. This offers a potential of, say, liberation.

**FRANK:** Another dimension possible to varieties of abstract programming is literally using videotape or the TV screen as a temporal canvas. It's like a canvas, only the other dimension of time is introduced; and the innumerable implications are opening us, as far as total environment constructions, or constructing environments which are in their totality *that* feedback which we want to explore.

**IRA:** In addition, there's a further idea of entertainment, and the individual becoming his own entertainment. More and more, I see people laying out, and boredom creeping in on the scene, or simply lack of initiative. Now seeing this over a period of time being mediaized or seeing yourself in front of a TV camera—seeing the feedback—breeds the notion that we're all potential actors—effectors of the environment—that we can do amazing things. It's a matter of reshaping ourselves perhaps.